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SENSITIVE

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DEPT PLS PASS CDC (NCOX, SBLOUNT) AND TO HHS (STEIGER, HICKEY)

E.O. 12356: N/A

TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [EAGR](#) [CASC](#) [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [AMED](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTH INDIA PREPARES TO DEFEND AGAINST AVIAN INFLUENZA
THREAT

REFS: A) KOLKATA 25, B) KOLKATA 24

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The preparedness of India's southern states to manage a potential outbreak of Avian Influenza (AI) in the region is mixed. Tamil Nadu appears better prepared than the other southern states, but a severe outbreak is likely to stretch both the state and national governments' abilities, as influenza-fighting drugs like Tamiflu are in short supply. Speaking in Chennai on January 19, National Minister for Health Anbumani Ramadoss defended the decision to remove Tamiflu from the open market, arguing that misuse of the drug might lead to the development of more dangerous forms of AI. End Summary.

Health Minister defends Tamiflu decision

¶2. (SBU) Defending his ministry's decision to remove the AI-fighting drug Tamiflu from the open market, the federal Minister of Health, Anbumani Ramadoss told the press in Chennai on January 19 that making the drug available outside of official government channels would likely cause people to use it to treat more common forms of influenza or other diseases. This, he argued, could encourage the AI virus to develop resistance to the drug. The press had highlighted criticism of the policy in the wake of the recent AI outbreak in West Bengal.

¶3. (SBU) State health authorities in the South, which hold few -- if any -- stocks of Tamiflu, blame high prices and non-availability in the open market. The Director of Tamil Nadu's Public Health Department told us that the GoI's ban on the sale of Tamiflu is forcing states to depend on the federal government for supplies.

Mixed preparedness for human AI cases in the South

¶4. (SBU) Tamil Nadu is the southern state best prepared to manage a potential AI outbreak. Public health authorities have already moved stocks of Tamiflu into the districts of Salem and Erode, the state's poultry centers. The state's Director of Public Health told us that all district level referral hospitals are capable of handling cases of AI infections in humans. He also said that Tamil Nadu has at least 1500 doses of Tamiflu available.

¶5. (SBU) The Director of Andhra Pradesh's Health Services Department told us that the state has activated isolation wards in six

hospitals that could handle human patients infected with AI. He also said that each of these hospitals has 100 doses of Tamiflu.

¶16. (SBU) Karnataka's Assistant Director of Public Health told us that the state has only three hospitals capable of providing adequate isolation wards. He also said that none of these hospitals has Tamiflu yet, although the state is working to procure adequate stocks.

¶17. (SBU) Kerala's Director of Public Health told us that the state had four hospitals capable of handling human AI cases adequately. She also said that Kerala had no stocks on Tamiflu, noting that the price of USD 2 per dose made it difficult for her state to afford.

Animal health authorities in the South on high alert

¶18. (SBU) The West Bengal outbreak has put animal health authorities in the South on high alert, especially in high-risk areas. Rapid action teams, with staff from both public health and animal health departments, are on alert with orders to cull birds if an outbreak is detected. Animal health authorities in all southern states report that their staffs have trained to identify AI symptoms and take preventive measures.

¶19. (SBU) The Director of Andhra Pradesh's Animal Husbandry Department told us that his department has identified six districts in the state as being at especially high risk for AI. He also said that he has reminded livestock inspectors in these areas to remain vigilant and pay special attention to poultry flocks in their respective jurisdictions.

¶10. (SBU) Similarly, Tamil Nadu's animal health authorities are

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increasing their vigilance. The state's Director of Animal Husbandry told us that his inspectors had increased their inspections of large poultry farms, in particular.

¶11. (SBU) January 23 news reports indicate death of several country chicken in Kuchipalayam and Vettapalayam villages in Tamil Nadu's poultry and egg hub. The Joint Director of State Animal Husbandry Department indicated that the poultry deaths were due to Ranikhet disease.

¶12. (SBU) Karnataka has stepped up its vigil against AI and is monitoring the situation. The Director of the Department of Animal Husbandry has reported in the media that surveillance in high density poultry areas around major Karnataka cities/towns such as Bangalore, Mangalore, Hubli, Dharwad, Gulburga, Mysore and Belgaum has increased. Closer watch is also in place on bird sanctuaries and destinations such as Kokkarebellur, Rangangathittu, Haladi, Kadalkere and Belandur. The Secretary of Karnataka's Animal Husbandry Department D.V. Prasad will head a committee to monitor the Karnataka situation. As of January 22, there is no case reported of AI.

AI fears add to poultry industry's woes

¶13. (SBU) Southern poultry farmers were facing difficulties even before the West Bengal AI outbreak. The rise in international commodity prices has raised the price of feed, pressuring margins for farmers. The managing director of a South Indian poultry farm told us that southern farmers fear that the West Bengal AI outbreak may lead to a re-imposition of a recently lifted ban on Indian poultry imports into lucrative West Asian markets. He said that consumption of poultry products in India is already slumping due to rising prices as farmers attempt to pass higher costs on to consumers. The West Asian markets, he said, offer Indian producers better prices than local markets, adding that southern poultry farmers will have difficulties making ends meet if West Asian markets are blocked again.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Comment: A large-scale outbreak of AI in South India would strain severely the resources of any of the South's state governments. The federal government's control of critical resources like Tamiflu means that the efficiency of state-federal interactions will be critical in managing an AI crisis. If farmers, already hurting from current market conditions, believe that the government will not compensate them effectively for culled birds, then many may be reluctant to cooperate fully, making the task of controlling an outbreak that much harder. End comment.

¶15. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.